Baha'is

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(6,160 words)

Adherents of Baha?ism (ahl al-Baha?), widely known as the "Baha?i Faith," an independent world religion with Islamic origins. The Baha?i religion, a universalization of Babism, was founded by Mirza Husayn-?Ali Nuri (1817–92), known as Baha? Allah/Baha?ullah (Splendor of God; standardized Baha?i spelling, Baha'u'llah), in Baghdad in the year 1863. In 1866, it emerged as a distinct faith-community in Adrianople (Edirne). Baha?i identity is fully independent. While Baha?is do not identify as Muslims, Baha?is regard the Qur?an with profound respect as divine revelation, as do Muslims, except that Baha?is have their own corpus of sacred scriptures, quite apart from the Qur?an.

Baha?is also believe in Muhammad as the "Seal of the Prophets and of the Messengers" (going beyond the Qur?an's honorific of Muhammad as the "Seal of the Prophets" (khatam l-nabiyin) in Q 33:40) and hold him to be the final Messenger for the "Cycle of Prophecy." Prophecy foretells, as well as tells forth. In Baha?i doctrine, the "Cycle of Prophecy (kawr-i nubuvvat) or "Adamic Cycle" (kawr-i adam) prepared the world for the "Cycle of Fulfillment" (kawr-i tahaqquq va ikmal) or "Baha?i Cycle" (kawr-i Baha?i), symbolically foreshadowed in the Qur?an as the "Great Announcement" (al-naba? al-?azim, Q 78:2; Baha?ullah, Kitab l-aqdas, par. 167). This Cycle of Fulfillment was inaugurated by the Bab, who prophesied the imminent advent of "Him who God shall manifest" (man yuzhiruhu llah), whom the majority of Babis (followers of the Bab) came to recognize as Baha?ullah.

A Baha?i theology of pluralism, with special reference to Islam, may be based on a statement by Shoghi Effendi, "Guardian" of the Baha?i Faith (1921–57): "Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispen-

sable in their value to mankind." (S. Effendi, World Order, p. 58). This, of course, applies as much to Islam as to other religions.

Having arisen out of Islamic historical context and milieu, the Baha?i religion has certain Islamicate elements, yet Baha?ism exhibits certain other features that are supra-Islamicate and distinct in character. For instance, Islamic doctrine adheres to a belief in successive revelations, beginning with Adam, and culminating with the Prophet Muhammad as the "Seal of the Prophets." In Baha?i teachings, the idea of successive revelations is invested with a teleology that transforms it into "progressive revelation" (tajdid va takamul-i adyan) where the succession of Messengers throughout the history of religions is not only sequential but cumulative, coefficient with the social evolution of humanity (Y. Ioannesyan, The concept of the "manifestations of God's will"). As humankind advances socially, so does the corresponding need for guidance and laws suited to the exigencies of the day and age. Here, "progressive" conveys the notion of "superior" in respect of "fuller" and "more advanced," without making a claim of intrinsic superiority.

Before focusing on Babi and Baha?i approaches to the interpretation of the Qur?an, some distinctive features of Baha?ism may be highlighted here. Baha?ullah, on 22 April 1863 privately declared himself "Him whom God shall manifest" (man yuzhiruhu llah), the messianic theophany foretold by the Bab. In open epistles to Queen Victoria, Napoleon III, Pope Pius IX and other world leaders during the Adrianople and ?Akka (Haifa) periods (1864-92), Baha?ullah publicly proclaimed himself the advent of the millenarian "Promised One" of all religions—a "multiple-messiahship" (C.
Buck, Unique, 158), i.e. the Zoroastrian Shah Bahram Varjavand, the Jewish Everlasting Father (Isa 9:6)/Lord of Hosts, the Christian Spirit of Truth, the Shi?i al-Husayn redivivus, the Sunni return of Christ, and "Him
who God shall manifest," as announced by the Bab (see APOCALYPSE).

As "World Reformer" (muslih al-'alam), Baha?ullah advocated world peace, parliamentary democracy, disarmament, an international language, the harmony of science and religion, interfaith concord as well as gender and racial equality. From a historicist perspective, Baha?i principles represent modernist universalizations of Islamic canons—which were announced during the reform period in the Ottoman Empire where Baha?ullah was an exile (Alkan, Dissent, p. 90 and ch. 4)—yet transcending the traditional believer/infidel dichotomy (see BELIEF AND UNBELIEF). On the basis of a comparative approach to the writings of Baha?ullah and the Ottoman reformers, we can say that certain ideas, such as the criticism of autocratic rule and its substitution by a constitutional monarchy, certainly converged. The approach of Ottoman and Iranian reformers was embedded in the framework of a modernist or revivalist Islam. However, the responses of Baha?ullah—and those of his eldest son and designated

successor, ?Abdu?l-Baha (1844–1921)—can be regarded as supra-Islamic and universalistic reforms that went beyond the proposals of the reformers in the Ottoman Empire (Alkan, Dissent, p. 218). Much the same held true in comparison with the Islamic reforms advocated by Iranian modernists (Buck, Baha?ullah as "World Reformer").

In precocious religious preparation for a global society, Baha?ullah's signal
contribution was to sacralize certain secular modernist reforms within an irreducibly original paradigm of world unity in which peace is made sacred. By designating his son ?Abdu?l-Baha (Servant of Baha?, d. 1921) as interpreter, exemplar and successor and by establishing elected councils, Baha?ullah instituted his Covenant, symbolized as "the Crimson Ark" (C. Buck, Paradise, ch. 5). This is the organizing principle of the Baha?i community and the means to safeguard its integrity against major schism. Succeeding ?Abdu?l-Baha in 1921 as "Guardian" of the Baha?i Faith, Shoghi Effendi (d. 1957) globalized and evolved the Baha?i administration as a system of local and national Spiritual Assemblies. This led in 1963 to the establishment of the Universal House of Justice, the international Baha?i governing body, on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel.

The purpose of the Baha?i Faith, as the religion is now known, is to unify the world through its principles of unity, which range from family relations to international relations. According to a recent survey, some 50 Baha?i principles of unity have been identified in the primary sources (Persian, Arabic and English) as follows:

50 Baha?i Principles of Unity
I. Individual Relationship with God: (1) "Mystic feeling which unites nan with God"; II. Family Relations: (2) Unity of Husband and Wife (vahdat); (3) Unity of the family (ittihad va ittifaq dar miyan-i khandan); III. Interpersonal Relations: (4) Oneness of Emotions (ihsasat-i vahida); (5) Spiritual Oneness (vahdat-i rawhani); IV. Gender Relations: (6) Unity of the Rights of Men and Women (vahdat-i huquq-i rijal va nisa?); (7) Unity in Education (vahdat-i usul
va qavanin-i tarbiyat); V. Economic Relations: (8) Economic Unity (ittihad-i iqtisadi); (9) Unity of People and Wealth (ittihad-i nufus va
amval) [i.e. beneficence/philanthropy]; VI. Race Relations: (10) Unity in Diversity; (11) Unity of Races (vahdat-i jins); VII. Environmental Relations: (12) Unity of Existence (Oneness of Being and Manifestation (Arabic: wahdat al-wujud wa shuhud/Persian: vahdat-i vujud va shuhud); (13) Unity of Species (vahdat-i jins); (14) Unity with the Environment; VIII. Interfaith Relations: (15) Unity of God (tawhid-i ilahi); (16) Mystic Unity of God and His Manifestations; (17) Unity of the Manifestations of God (maqam-i tawhid); (18) Unity of Truth

(vahdat-i haqiqat); (19) Unity Among Religions (ittihad dar din); (20) Peace Among Religions (sabab-i ulfat bayn-i adyan/suhul bayn-i adyan); IX. Scientific Relations: (21) Unity of Science and Religion (vahdat-i ‘ilm va din); (22) Methodological Coherence; (23) Unity of Thought (vahdat-i ara) in World Undertakings; X. Linguistic Relations: (24) Unity of Language (vahdat-i lisan); XI. International Relations: (25) Unity of Conscience (vahdat-i vujdan); (26) Unity in Freedom (vahdat-i azadi); (27) Evolving Social Unities; (28) Unity in the Political Realm (vahdat-i siyasat); (29) Unity of Nations (vahdat-i vatan); (30) Unity of All Mankind/World Unity (ittifaq-i kull va ittihad-i ‘umum/vahdat-i ‘alam-i insani); (31) Unity of the World Commonwealth; (32) Unity of the Free; XII. Baha?i Relations: (33) Unity of the Baha?i Revelation; (34) All-Unifying Power (jaat-i jami‘a); (35) Unity of Doctrine; (36) Unity of Meaning; (37) Baha?i Unity (vahdat-i Baha’i); (38) Unity among Baha?i Women (al-ittihad wa’l-ittifaq); (39) Unity in Religion (vahdat-i dini); (40) Unity of Station (ittihad-i maqam); (41) Unity of Souls (ittihad-i nufus); (42) Unity in Speech (ittihad dar qawl); (43) Unity in [Ritual] Acts (ittihad-i a’mal); (44) Unity of Baha?i Administration; (45) Unity of Purpose; (46) Unity of Means; (47) Unity of Vision; (48) Unity of Action; (49) Unity of the Spiritual Assembly (yiganigi); (50) Unity of Houses of Justice and Governments (Buck, God & Apple Pie, p. 329; id., Fifty Baha?i principles of unity).

Applying a secular methodology to better understand the genesis of these doctrinal, ethical, social and administrative principles, the Baha?i religion
may be viewed as a distinctive “response to modernity.” From a faith-perspective, however, Baha?is hold that the Bab and Baha?ullah were each the recipients of divine revelation (wahy), with new social teachings best suited for modernity and postmodernity.

Baha?ism underwent transformations in ethos and organization throughout three missionary phases: the Islamic context (1844–92), the international missions (1892–1963) and global diffusion (1963–present). The Islamic context was co-extensive with the combined ministries of Baha?ullah and

his precursor, Sayyid ?Ali-Muhammad Shirazi (1819–50), known as the Bab (Gate), the prophet-martyr of the Babi movement.

The year 1260/1844 marked the Shi?i millennium, a thousand lunar years since the occultation of the Twelfth Imam (see IMAM; SHI?ISM AND THE QUR?AN). On 22 May 1844 the Bab effected a decisive, eschatological break from Islam by means of composing, aloud before a guest, Mulla Husayn Bushru’i (1813–1849), that evening, the first sura (Surat al-Mulk)
of an exegetical work, entitled Sustainer of the Names (of God) (Qayyum al-asma?), often referred to as the Commentary on the Sura of Joseph, an audacious and revolutionary commentary on the twelfth sura of the Qur?an

(see JOSEPH). In this work he “proclaimed himself the focus of an Islamic apocalypse” (T. Lawson, Structure, 8).

The Bab’s earliest works exhibit a conscious effort to extend and amplify a qur?anic voice, a crucial warrant of revelation. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the Qayyum al-asma? is its claim to be the “new Qur?an” (22). To illustrate this audacious claim, two exemplars may be cited: “And verily, had these two Furqans not been from God, they (i.e. people) would, verily, have found in them more disparities” (QA 99, trans. Y. Ioannesyan, Prophetic mission of the Bab, p. 197). And: “Verily, We have sent down this Book as the mystery of the Qur?an. … And there is no one except for those who have renounced God, who would question even one of its letters as not being from God. And verily, God hath sent it (i.e. the Book) down by His pre-existent might to His Remembrance (i.e. the Bab) anew, with a new Truth, in a new way” (QA 41, id., p. 202). N. Mohammadhosseini, confirming this same claim, explains that the Bab, in QA 3, “mentions three times that the Qur?an has been revealed to his heart”
(idem, The Commentary on the Sura of Joseph, p. 8). Similar claims are made in QA 7 and 26 (id.). N. Saiedi states generally: “The Qayyum al-asma? is also frequently called the ‘Qur?an’ or the ‘Inner Qur?an’” (idem,
Gate of the Heart, p. 140). In the first chapter of the QA, the Bab makes the stunning declaration that his religion is henceforth the “true Islam” to
which all should turn: “Thus whoso seeketh Islam (submission to God), let him submit unto this Remembrance. … Whoso rejecteth this true Islam, God shall not accept, on the Day of Resurrection, any of his deeds” (trans. Saiedi, Gate of the Heart, p. 142).

The QA is written in the form of the divine reality speaking to the Bab, which Cambridge Orientalist, Edward Granville Browne, presumed to be the “Universal Intelligence” (?aql-i kull) (The Babis of Persia, p. 909, n. 2).

Evidence from the QA, according to Y. Ioannesyan (Prophetic mission of the Bab, passim), shows that the Bab proclaimed his teaching as an independent divine revelation, while Babism, from its inception, emerged as a post-Islamic, independent religious system. The divine origin of QA Book and its uniqueness are repeatedly emphasized. The Bab is privileged in the QA as “the Word of God” (i.e. personifying the Bab as the recipient and manifestation of divine revelation).

The Bab clearly differentiates between Muslims (“the people of the Qur?an”) and the Babis as “the people of this Book,” referring to the QA).

Such evidence, and more, prove that Babism went well beyond any reformist movement in Islam and that the Bab did not fall into the category of an Islamic modernist or reformer. No founder of a school would ever claim this station for himself as the Bab did. The QA is so extraordinary as

to be revolutionary within an Islamic context. This remarkable text instantly projected the Bab beyond the orbit of Islam, notwithstanding the QA's consciously qur?anic style and discourse.

One of the Bab's most distinctive exegetical techniques is his "exploded commentary," which is an exegetical tour de force. In works on Q 108 and Q 103, the exegesis proceeds "not only verse by verse, or even word by word, but also letter by letter" (T. Lawson, Dangers, 179). For instance, the Bab wrote a commentary on the sura of al-Kawthar (Q 108), the shortest sura in the Qur?an, consisting of four lines of Arabic only. Based on the text of a very early manuscript which originated during the Bab's lifetime, the Bab's Commentary on the sura of al-Kawthar spans over two hundred pages in length, in which the Bab interprets every letter of every single word comprising al-Kawthar in manifold aspects. This highly mystical and original work is full of imagery that serves as a grammar of symbols vindicating the mission of the bearer of a new religious revelation which the Bab claimed for himself (Y. Ioannesyan, The Bab's Commentary on the sura of al-Kawthar, passim). O. Ghaemmaghami reinforces this thesis in a close reading of an episode, found midway through the tafsir, in which the Bab recounts his meeting with the Hidden Imam. After an in-depth analysis, Ghaemmaghami concludes: "In an exquisite performance of storytelling the Bab is able to carefully present himself as the promised Imam" (idem, The Bab's Encounter with the Hidden Imam, p. 185). The Bab's commentaries on the Qur?an are remarkable in that, by force of his prophetic authority, "interpretation became revelation" (T. Lawson, Interpretation, 253). In 1848, he produced a new law code (Bayan-i farsi), paradoxically super-Islamic in piety, yet supra-Islamic in principle. According to A. Eschraghi, the Bab had three primary purposes in producing this new shari?a: (1) to prepare for the advent of "He whom God shall manifest"; (2) "to provoke the clerical establishment and shatter the foundations of their often-abused institutionalized authority" which "led to the ulama's hostility and the Bab's subsequent martyrdom"; and (3) to prove the independence of the the Babi religion from Islam (idem, Undermining the foundations of orthodoxy, 238).

After the Bab's execution (1850) by the Persian authorities, Baha?ullah revitalized the Babi community by employing symbolic interpretation as strategy to abolish episodic Babi antinomianism. In the Arabic Tablet of "all food" (Lawh-i kull al-ta?am, 1854—note that the titles of Baha?i works written in Arabic are conventionally given in Persianized form), Baha?ullah related the abolishment of the Jewish dietary restrictions in Q 3:93 to the mystical and cosmological realms. While the Baghdad period (1853–63) was eschatologically charged with his own messianic secrecy (ayyam-i butun), Baha?ullah, in his pre-eminent doctrinal work, the Book of certitude (Kitab-i iqan, hereafter Iqan), advanced an extended qur?anic

and
biblical argument to authenticate the Bab's prophetic credentials. This remarkable text was "revealed" (as stated in the colophon) in the span of 48 hours. It was the late Baha?i scholar, Ahang Rabbani, who discovered that the Iqan was written in January 1861 (Rabbani, Conversion, pp. 34–35). Baha?ullah's repertoire of exegetical techniques includes most of the twelve "procedural devices" attested in the classical commentaries (Wansbrough, QS, part ii) as well as others.

Baha?ullah's style of discourse is itself exegetical, with frequent pairings,
linked by the Persian metaphorical genitive (idafa-yi majazi), of qur?anic
symbols and referents. Hermeneutically, Certitude resonates with five Islamic orientations to symbolism: 1. the semanticism of rhetoric, especially the science of tropes (?ilm al-bayan); 2. the dialectic of theology
(kalam); 3. reason (?aql) and analogy (qiyas) as a reflex of philosophy (falsafa) and jurisprudence (fiqh); 4. the use of allusion (ishara) and gnosis (ma?rifa qalbiya) in Sufi/Ishraqi mysticism (see SUFISM AND THE QUR?AN);
5. recourse to apocalyptic presentism, adducing prophetic proof-texts to instantiate a realized eschatology, a common characteristic of millenarian sectarianism.

In his Commentary on the sura "By the sun" (Tafsir surat wa-l-shams), while critical of rhetoric (?ilm al-balagha) and the cognate qur?anic sciences, Baha?ullah echoes al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) and al-Taftazani (d.
791/1389) in stressing the need to harmonize literal and figurative interpretations (C. Buck, Symbol, 91-2, 104). In his Tablet on esoteric interpretation (Lawh-i ta?wil), citing Q 3:5, Baha?ullah states that eschato-
logical verses are properly susceptible to esoteric interpretation (ta?wil) whereas qur?anic laws are to be understood by their obvious sense (tafsir, see EXEGESIS OF THE QUR?AN: CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL). Islamic prophetology is anchored in the received interpretation of Q 33:40, which is widely believed to establish Muhammad as the final prophet (see PROPHETS AND PROPHETHOOD). In what is perhaps his most significant exegetical maneuver, Baha?ullah relativizes that claim in order to supersede it, refocusing the reader's attention a mere four verses later (Q 33:44) on the eschatological attainment to the presence of God (liqa? Allah) on the last day (see ESCHATOLOGY):

Even as the Lord of being hath in His unerring Book (Qur?an), after (ba?d az) speaking of the "Seal" in His exalted utterance: "Muhammad is the Apostle of God and the Seal of the Prophets" (Q 33:40), hath revealed unto all people the promise (va?da) of "attainment unto the

divine Presence (liqa?-yi khuda).” To this attainment to the presence of the immortal King testify the verses of the Book, some of which We have already mentioned (vide par. 148: Q 29:23, 2:46, 2:249, 18:110, 13:2). The one true God is My witness! Nothing more exalted or more explicit than “attainment unto the divine Presence” hath been revealed in the Qur?an. (va khuda-yi vahid shahid-i maqal ast kih hich amri a’zam az liqa’ va asrah-i az an dar furqan zikr nayaftih.) Well is it
with him that hath attained thereunto, in the day wherein most of the people, even as ye witness, have turned away therefrom.
And yet, through the mystery of the former (avval) verse, they have turned away from the grace promised by the latter (thani), despite the fact that “attainment unto the divine Presence” in the “Day of Resurrection” (liqa? dar yawm-i qiyam) is explicitly stated in the Book (Qur?an). (Baha?ullah, Certitude, trans. Shoghi Effendi, Pars. 181–182; parenthetical references added; id. Iqan, Pars. 181–182).

In this pivotal passage, although Baha?ullah relates back to “verses of the
Book, some of which We have already mentioned,” a quick search of the Iqan shows that, in par. 148, Baha?ullah cites Q 29:23, 2:46, 2:249, 18:110,
13:2. Yet in this passage, Baha?ullah also alludes to a Qur?anic announcement of the “attainment unto the divine Presence” in the “Day of Resurrection” (liqa? dar yawm-i qiyam) that comes “after” (ba?d az) the “Seal”
verse.
Shoghi Effendi, in his dual role as authorized translator and interpreter of Baha?i scriptures, provides a word-for-word, literal translation in rendering
the Persian so: “And yet, through the mystery of the former.” Then Shoghi Effendi inserts one word for amplification: “verse” (not in the original Persian). This subtle, yet highly significant, gloss disambiguates the text, narrowing the reading from an episodic sequence of prophetic/eschatological events (“Seal of the Prophets” followed by “Divine Presence”) to a textual, qur?anic sequence, i.e. of a pair verses descriptive
of this same sequence. This makes perfect sense since the preposition “after” (ba?d az) can also mean “next.”
An attractive hypothesis (with strong evidence shy of conclusive proof) is that Baha?ullah intended this pair of verses, Q 33:40 and Q 33:44, to be read
together. Indeed, the very next verse after the “Seal” verse that refers to the
eschatological encounter with God is Q 33:44, which reads: “Their greeting the Day they meet Him will be, ‘Peace.’ And He has prepared for them a noble reward” (tr. Sahih International). A Shi?i rendering is: “On the

day
when they will be brought into the presence of their Lord, their greeting to each other will be, ‘Peace be with you.’ God has prepared an honorable reward them” (tr. Muhammad Sarwar).

Here, cognates of liqa? and yawm are found in Q 33:44. The Arabic word for “they will meet Him” is yalqawnahu (3rd person masculine plural imperfect verb, related to liqa?) and “Day” is yawma (accusative masculine
noun). These terms correspond—conceptually as well as linguistically—to Baha?ullah’s reference to “‘attainment unto the divine Presence’ in the
“Day of Resurrection’” (liqa? dar yawm-i qiyam).

In 1974, the late Baha?i scholar and martyr, Kamal al-Din Bakhtavar (executed in Kashmar in Khurasan, Iran on 26 July 1981), in his Risala-yi Istimrar-i Zuhurat-i Ilahiyya (Tehran 1974), pp. 101–102, drew the very same connection between Q 33:40 and 33:44 that, in 1995, Buck

independently made in Symbol and Secret (pp. 194–98) (Bakhtavar, Risala, 101 (quoting Q 33:44a)–101 (quoting Baha?ullah, Kitab-i iqan, Pars. 181–
182/p. 112).
The juxtaposition—indeed, the pairing—not only of two concepts, but two pivotal verses—Q 33:40 and Q 33:44—has dramatic effect. Among Muslims worldwide, the importance of Q 33:40 is universally acknowledged. In the Iqan, Baha?ullah places Q 33:44 on a par with Q 33:40. Indeed, as paramount in prophetic history as the advent of Muhammad as the “Seal of the Prophets” surely is, of even greater moment is the eschatological encounter with God, according to Baha?ullah’s interpretation/argument.

It now remains to be seen how Baha?ullah interprets Q 33:44 and parallels (adduced in par. 48 as Q 29:23, 2:46, 2:249, 18:110, 13:2). Arguing that direct beatific vision of God is impossible, Baha?ullah reasons that Q 33:44 anticipates a future theophany who, as deus revelatus and divine vicegerent, is symbolically God by proxy. Similarly, Baha?ullah, in an earlier Baghdad work, Gems of divine mysteries (Jawahir al-asrar), explains:
Know then that the paradise (hadhihi al-janna, lit. “this Garden”) that appeareth in the day of God (yawm Allah) surpasseth every other paradise and excelleth the realities of Heaven (haqa?iq al-ridwan). For when (ba?d alladhi, lit. “after”) God—blessed and glorified is He—sealed the station of prophethood (maqam al-nubuwwa) in the person of Him Who was His Friend (habibihi), His Chosen One (safiyyihi), and His Treasure (khiyaratihi) amongst His creatures, as hath been revealed from the Kingdom of glory: “but He is the Apostle of God and the Seal of the Prophets” (Q 33:40), He promised all men that they shall attain unto His own presence in the Day of Resurrection (wa?ada al-?ibad bi-liqa?ihi yawm al-qiyama). In this He meant to

emphasize the greatness of the Revelation to come, as it hath indeed been manifested through the power of truth. (Baha?ullah, Gems of Divine Mysteries, par. 58; id., Jawahir al-Asrar, par. 58.)

Here, a greater "Revelation" is posited. Revelation is a concept familiar to all Muslims. Simply put, Baha?ullah, at some length in the Iqan, argues that the Qur?an presages the advent of the Bab as the "Promised One." Of even greater moment is what Baha?ullah implies. The entire thesis of Buck's monograph, Symbol and Secret (1995/2004), is that the primary eschatological symbol in the Iqan is the Bab, while, at the same time, a messianic "secret" pervades the Iqan as a subtext, charging the work with heightened eschatological tension, auguring Baha?ullah's imminent declaration of his mission, to the discerning, whether before or after Baha?ullah's prophetic mission commenced. By force of explicative logic, Certitude—arguably the world's most-widely-read non-Muslim qur?anic commentary—served as an advance prophetic warrant for Baha?ullah's proclaimed mission to unify the world.

Baha?ullah's other Qur?an commentaries include, inter alia, Commentary on the mysterious (lit. "disconnected") letters (Tafsir-i hurufat-i muqatta?a; see LETTERS AND MYSTERIOUS LETTERS), which incorporates a discourse on the Light Verse (Q 24:35); Commentary on "He is" (Tafsir-i Hu[wa]). As A. Eschraghi notes, Baha?ullah "initially engaged in esoteric and allegorical qur?anic exegesis" but, from the 1860s onwards, "the prominence of 'Islamic' topics clearly diminished in Baha?ullah's writings as he works towards founding a new religion and introduces distinct doctrines" (idem, Promised One, 112). Moreover, Baha?ullah, while affirming the legitimacy of the Imamate in principle, criticizes the popular Shi?i belief in existence of a Twelfth Imam. Eschraghi notes that "it became patently clear that Baha? Allah did not believe in the Twelfth Imam's continued presence" (referring to the Greater Occultation), yet "stopped short of explicitly denying his very existence" (idem, Promised One, 123). In roundly critiquing Twelver Shi?i Mahdi doctrines as impossible of literal fulfillment, Baha?ullah radically reinterpreted the Shi?i eschaton such that the "Baha?i Faith" is more aptly characterized as a "de-messianized" religion, rather than a "messianic movement" (id., p. 134). (For a similar analysis, see C. Buck, Baha?ullah as Zoroastrian Saviour.)

Succeeding his father Baha?ullah on the latter's passing in 1892, ?Abdu?l-Baha authored works of tafsir as well, which provide both exoteric and esoteric commentaries. A good example is ?Abdu?l-Baha?'s tafsir on the opening verses of sura 30. Alive to the priority of spiritual over material

realities, ?Abdu?l-Baha quickly addresses the exoteric meaning by acknowledging the standard commentary that these verses refer to the overthrow of the Byzantines in 614 CE by the Persian king Chosroes. Then ?Abdu?l-Baha gives nine esoteric, or mystical, interpretations in which he sets forth the stages of the soul in the Arc of Ascent (M. Momen, ?Abdu?l-Baha's commentary on the qur?anic verses concerning the overthrow of the

Byzantines, passim). See also N. Alkan, "By the Fig and the Olive." ?Abdu?l-Baha's commentary in Ottoman Turkish on the qur?anic sura 95.

Since the works of the Bab, Baha?ullah and ?Abdu?l-Baha constitute the corpus of Baha?i scriptures, the Qur?an itself, while respected and revered
by Baha?is worldwide (numbering some seven million, with Baha?i communities established in every country in the world except for North Korea and the Vatican City), does not occupy a central place in Baha?i doctrine and praxis. However, because of their positive disposition toward the Qur?an and Muhammad alike, Baha?is have long promoted a positive appreciation for the Book and Prophet par excellence. In this regard, Baha?is are natural allies of Muslims. A sad irony is that this view of common cause based on common ground is not always reciprocated. The Baha?i-Muslim encounter in Iran—the country where the Babi and Baha?i religions originated—continues to be fraught with difficulty (due to ongoing persecution of the Baha?is as the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran), which topic is outside the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that Baha?is appreciate, and will continue to value, their historical and doctrinal Islamic heritage.

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